

SOME BIRDS SEEN ON THE GANDAK-KOSI WATERSHED
IN MARCH, 1951

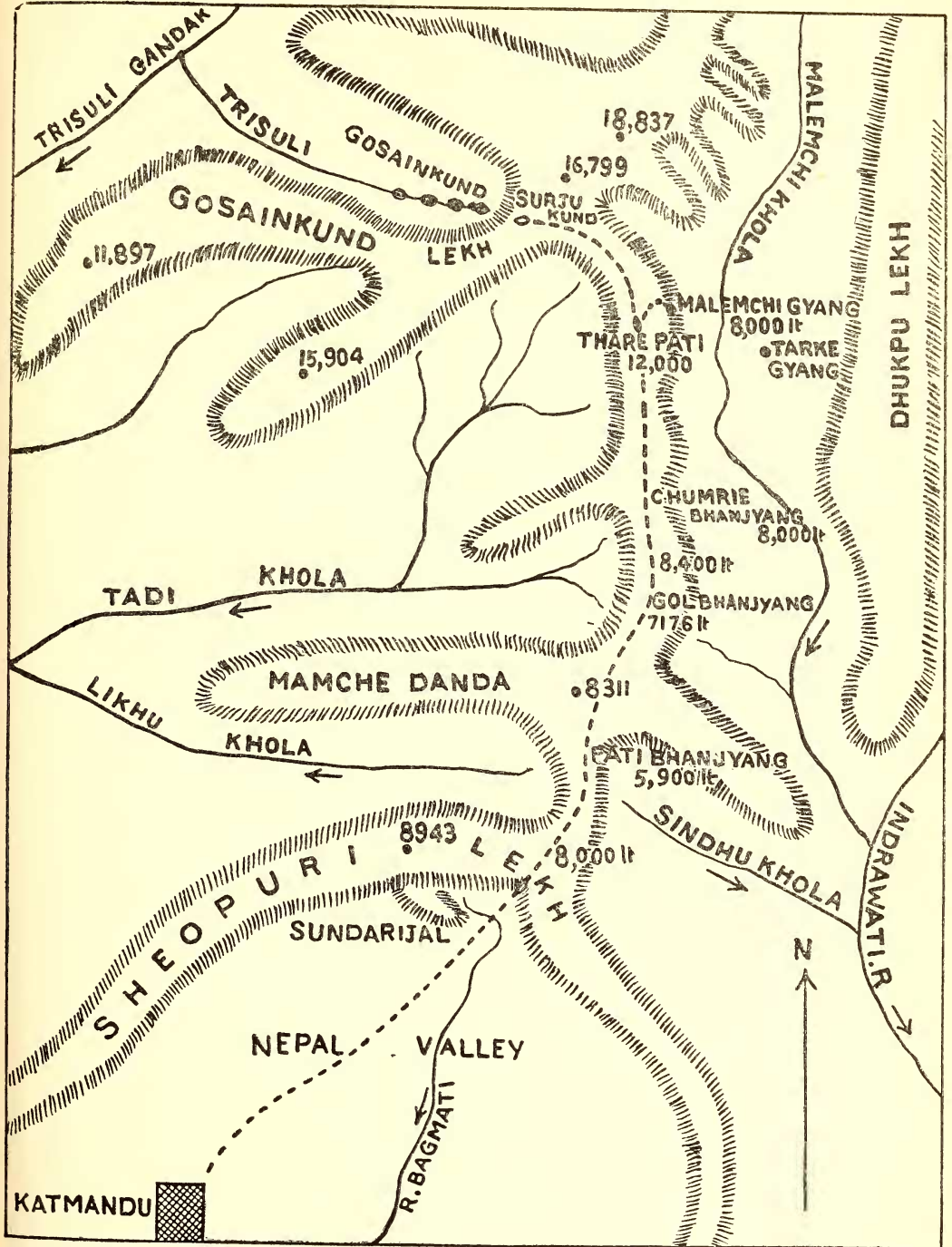
BY
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(With a sketch map and a plate)

Ever since reading in the *Journal* of April 1948 (Vol. 47, pp. 432-443) Mr. Smythies's account of his journey along the Gandak-Kosi watershed, I have longed to visit the mountains he describes so well. During our first year in Nepal it was, however, impossible as I could not leave my 3 children alone in Kathmandu. This winter it seemed more hopeful, the children being safely established in England at school and with their grandmother. Incidentally, what words of praise are sufficient for to-day's grandmothers, who, in spite of rations, queues and servantless homes still open their arms to (frequently) spoilt and temperamental grandchildren from abroad? Unfortunately the winter of 1950-1951 was full of unexpected political activity. The tranquil backwater of Nepal became suddenly full of activity and it was not till March that leave became at all possible. At Easter we were given 8 days leave, during which I hoped we might reach the sacred lakes of Gosainkund and perhaps catch a glimpse of those thrilling birds, the great Parrotbill and the Beautiful Rosefinch. These hopes were all doomed to disappointment, but nevertheless the 8 days were the most delightful I have ever spent. As our trip was at a different season to that of Mr. Smythies, with conditions as different as possible, and consequently different birds, the following notes may be of some interest. We left on March 20. The winter had been an unusually dry one, with no rain for months, but the weather broke on the day we left and rain threatened as we walked up the hill past Sundarijal (5,000 ft.). The steep cultivated land beyond the reservoir was yellow with flowering *Berberis* and *Hypericum*, and wild pear was still in flower above the village. The forest starts at 6,500 ft. and a pleasant easy walk along the Sheopuri ridge follows. A tree (*Symplocos sumantia*?) was in flower all along the ridge and very attractive, the numerous stamens giving a powder puff appearance to the flowers, some yellow, some white. We had intended to have our first camp near Pati Bhanjyang, but the ominous storm clouds decided us to camp as soon as possible. Accordingly we stopped just short of the crest of the ridge, and a lovely camp site it was. The coolies went on to a little hamlet just over the ridge. We were in none too soon, for the rain came down in torrents and continued most of the night. Next morning we woke to a perfect day: Grey-winged Blackbirds singing gloriously and the whole forest sparkling in the sunshine, the dust of months swept away by the rain. A large magnolia (or *Michelia*) tree near our camp was covered with huge waxy cream-coloured flowers. These attracted numbers of birds, chiefly Striated Green Bulbuls (*Alcurus striatus*). They are very local round here and will be extremely common in one place for some weeks and then

disappear, not to be seen in that area again perhaps for years. They have much sweeter notes than any other bulbul I know. The Collared Ixulus (*I. flavicollis*) also very common, and of course numbers of Red-headed and Green-backed Tits. We left at 9 and the view from the ridge (8,000 ft.) of the snow mountains was superb. The path down to Pati Bhanjyang is very steep, and as one scrambles down one looks straight across at the even steeper climb up the hills opposite and bitterly regrets the loss of height to be painfully made up later in the day. Dark-grey Bushchats and a very pale stonechat were seen here and not again. The leafless *Berberis* had very much the appearance of hawthorn bushes in England. A bush (*Edgeworthia gardneri*?) was common and in flower. It has a sweet distinctive perfume. We call it the 'buttered-egg' plant. Pati Bhanjyang is 5,900 ft. according to our altimeter, though 5,000 ft. on the map. The little town is dirty but very picturesque in a squalid way, and is obviously a dearly loved halt for the coolies. As four tracks meet here there is probably a cheap market. We foolishly went on without seeing the coolies safely beyond its fleshpots and they were very late in catching us up. Red-rumped Swallows and Himalayan Swiftlets were hawking back and forth across the pass. From the town the path at first traverses an attractive hill-side cultivated in terraces; the barley here was fine and well grown. Indian corn had just been planted and the first green spears were showing above ground. Wild cherry, plum and pear grew in the gullies and the yellow flowers of *Hypericum* everywhere. I heard the Hill Warbler (*Suya*), but did not see one. The Streaked Laughing-thrush is also often heard here. Soon the path starts to climb steeply, up and up through scrub, mostly *Gaultheria*, now in bloom with stiff sprays of waxy white flowers. *Ageratum* is a weed all over this hill. At 7,000 ft. we reached a ridge where a large and very dirty Tamang village sprawls for over a quarter mile along a very narrow ridge. This was the only place where kites were seen. The forest (oak) which had covered this ridge had been recently killed. The oaks, barked, lopped and dead stand like stiff black skeletons, and the ground beneath them has been made up into fresh fields with their leaves and branches buried in them. No doubt very rich for one or two crops, but so steep is the land that I doubt if it will hold for two monsoons and then the old fields which must have been protected by the trees will surely be swept down the precipitous slopes, and the ridge will be abandoned to thin scrub and *ageratum*.

At the end of the village the track again climbs steeply through piles of stones and boulders. At the top we came to another ridge, but this time covered with oak and rhododendron forest. Here we found the first Buddhist chorten and sat down for a rest and a chat with some Sherpas down from the high hills. They told us the snow was thigh deep at Thare Pati and no hope at all of reaching the sacred lakes. As there was no sign of the coolies, we decided we had better camp here and we found a lovely grassy meadow at the highest point of this ridge (8,000 ft.). Bushes of *Edgeworthia* and *Pieris formosa* in flower all round the camp and we had a superb view of snow mountains all along the east—Jugal Himal and on and on as far as Gauri Shankar. Much more exciting to us were the



ROUGH SKETCH OF KOSI-GANDAK WATERSHED

Scale: 1 inch = 4 miles

snows of the Gosainkund Lekh to the north. We were able to dry our tents etc. in the sun when the coolies finally arrived. We went to bed as soon as the sun sank, and fell asleep to the 'jug jugging' of the Jungle Nightjar.

We awoke next day to mist and cloud. A very green pipit was singing away from the top of an oak; it would sing while perched, but often soared a short distance into the air and then volplaned down singing all the time—*Anthus hodgsoni* I presume, but certainly not the race which winters in enormous numbers in the Nepal valley. Large flocks of what at first I thought were finches or buntings were ranging round the hill-sides. We saw these flocks, varying I should judge from about 50 to 400 birds, all the way from this camp up to 12,000 ft. My husband finally shot one which proved to be *Laiscopus himalayanus*, the Altai Hedge-sparrow. A pair of Chestnut-bellied Rock-thrushes were calling to each other with curious deep croaks—the male sat on top of a tree fanning his tail with each croak. Black Bulbuls were abundant but they were not seen beyond this point. Here the Verditer Flycatchers had already arrived, although I had not yet seen one down in the valley. They were paired and singing beautifully. They were not seen above 9,000 ft. Everywhere the whirring song of *Phylloscopus pulcher* was heard. The song is exactly like that of the English wood-warbler which always sounds to me like a watch spring being wound up and then allowed to run down. This whirring sound was heard all day in every patch of scrub or forest right up to 11,500 ft. I have also heard a gentle little warble which I believe is uttered by this bird, although I am not quite sure. If so, it would be an interesting parallel with the wood-warbler which also has a second song.

We left camp at 9 o'clock and descended a thousand feet through open scrub jungle where scattered rhododendrons blazed rosy and crimson, and the young bronze leaves of *Viburnum* and *Pieris ovalifolia* were opening everywhere—the latter a very beautiful tree with its curious spiral bark. There were also fields with well grown barley and wheat crops. We passed a little village on a pass known as Gol Bhanjyang, 7,100 ft., (here the map and our altimeter were for once in agreement) surrounded with hedges of *Edgeworthia*, its curious perfume filling the air. This was the last of the Tamang villages. From here onwards Sherpas took their place with chamries (half yak) instead of the little hill cattle. Sherpa villages were noticeably cleaner than the Tamang ones. From Gol Bhanjyang the path goes up a villainous steep hill, but the country was very beautiful and ringing with bird song. We reached the top (8,400 ft.) and turning a corner, entered an enchanted world—a rhododendron forest in full bloom. I have seen many feasts of flowers—narcissus in the Alps, anemones in Kashmir, bluebell woods in England, *Strobilanthes* in the Nilgiris—but never anything so wonderful as this. Some of the trees must have been over 40 ft. high and covered from top to bottom with flowers of every shade from crimson through rosy to palest powder-puff pink and, loveliest of all, pure white, so that some trees appeared as if wreathed in snow. The whole forest echoed with bird song—Nepal Sunbirds, Hoary Barwings Red-headed Bulfinches, Stripe throated Sivas, Stripe-throated and Collared Yuhinas, Red-headed and

Green-backed Tits, Himalayan Nuthatches and tree creepers. The exquisite jewel-like sunbirds flashing in and out of the flowers were a wonderful sight. I saw a male White-browed Rosefinch the only high level rosefinch seen on the whole trip. Clumps of *Mahonia*, not in flower grew in the forest and there was also a curious pink prickly creeper in bloom. We lingered enchanted, and I was quite ready to remain here for the entire 8 days, but my husband who hates a programme to be upset, insisted on going on. Unwillingly I left this paradise and descended to the last Bhanjyang known locally as Chamrie Bhanjyang (8,000 ft.). Here we passed the coolies eating their midday lunch which seemed to consist entirely of spring onions. From here we climbed through tragically lopped oaks, many dead standing like black scare-crows. (How long can a tree stand this continual lopping?) At about 8,800 ft. we emerged from the lopped forest on to a steep hill-side splashed with flowering rhododendrons, and at this height there were no more crimson flowers, all were pale pink or white. A thick forest of unlopped oak covered the hill above us. A local Sherpa said there was no water above this place for some miles so we decided to camp. It was difficult to find a flat enough place to pitch our camp, but we finally succeeded though our beds were tilted to a somewhat uncomfortable angle. When the sun set it was bitterly cold here at 9,000 ft. and we were glad of our down sleeping bags.

We woke next morning to a perfect day. Grey-winged blackbirds singing divinely; green pipits [Hodgson's] here also singing away. We heard the cheery notes of the Yellow-billed Magpies; though similar in pattern to the Red-billed, they are much sweeter and quite distinctive. We watched a flock of them following each other across the hill-side. A buzzard flew down into a tall tree and sat contemplating the world. Green-backed tits were common, but not seen above this camp, and there were no more Red-headed tits, their place being taken by the white headed *Aegithaliscus ioschistos*, so-named Rufous-fronted Tit, which were common here and up to 11,500 ft. *Siva strigula* common here, but not seen any higher. I heard a woodpecker drumming away and presently found it working at a nest hole about 20 ft. from the ground. I was very surprised to find it was *Dryobates macei* which I have always looked upon as a low level bird in Nepal. A Lämmergeier sailed superbly overhead and a very pale kestrel poised on quivering wings in front of the camp. We left at 9 and climbed straight up the hill through a dense forest of oak (*Quercus semecarpifolia*). For the first time one could see what magnificent trees they are when allowed to grow naturally without lopping. A few tree rhododendrons, mostly white, glowed through the dark forest. At 10,000 ft. we came out of the oaks and above this there were no more tree rhododendrons. We walked up an open grass lane about 20 yards cut through a dense forest of *Rhododendron falconeri*, the flowers all shades of very pale pink and cream spotted inside with purple. Their flowering season must be a very short one, as on many trees half the flowers had faded whilst others were still in bud. They are therefore much less beautiful than *R. arboreum*, although the dark drooping leaves with the thick rusty fluff underneath are very attractive. The grass was covered with tiny blue gentians and a



Path running down to Pati Bhanjyang showing terraced cultivation.



Photos

Author

Sherpa hut at 11,000 feet.

yellow hawkbit with stems so short that they appeared like golden stars on the grass. At 10,500 ft. we reached the top of the climb and the path wound round the side of the hill and then along a ridge. *R. falconeri* was everywhere, but at this height in bud only; there were also thickets of *R. barbatum* with warm pink bark and long drooping leaves of a very clear pale green both above and below. They were all in flower even up to 11,500 ft., the dark red flowers rather disappointing. The north slopes of the hills here were deep in snow and the effect of the warm pink stems against the coldness of blue-white snow shadows was startling and very beautiful indeed. Another rhododendron, *R. campanulatum*, was common, but its tight buds showed no signs of opening and I could not tell what colour they were likely to be. Silver firs began to appear, and junipers. The ground in damp places and the mossy banks were covered with a beautiful primula, like a primrose in size and habit but pink or pale mauve in colour (*P. petiolaris*?) Berberis grew in all the open places and seemed to be of 2 kinds: one a bush, hawthorn-like in appearance quite leafless, the withered crumpled red berries still hanging on the bare usually white stems; the other grew only 18 inches high. The stems were red and the bright red leaves were still adhering to the branches. It covered large patches and in the distance gave a warm glow to the otherwise rather cold grey landscape. I do not know if they are different species or merely varieties of *B. vulgaris*. Both plants have the usual 3 pronged spines. We heard the nutcracker here and saw a number of crested tits, and these I am sure were *Lophophanes melanolophus*, although I discovered on my return that these are not supposed to be found east of Garhwal. The row of white spots on the wing coverts was most distinct, and the bird was iron grey below with no touch of rufous. The nape patch appeared pure white. I am certain it was not *L. ater*, a bird I have seen in the high hills round the Nepal valley, but not met with on this trip.

The path wound along the ridge rising gently and dipping through exquisite valleys where deserted Sherpa huts stood on grassy margs and little streams bubbled through mossy banks starred with primulas. The ridge grew narrower and above 11,000 ft. there were no more flowers. Juniper scrub gave a rather sad grey-green look to the landscape. Soon the snow became so thick that it seemed cruel to take the barefooted coolies any further, so we left them to pitch camp near a little chorten where there were empty huts for them, and we went on ourselves to Tharepati. The ridge here is unbelievably narrow, the top being only about 15 ft. wide with great precipices each side running down to the Malemchi Khola on the east and to the Tadi Khola on the west. Across the Malemchi Khola we could see a tiny path running sheer up the opposite mountain side. This presumably was the path Mr. Smythies took on his way to the Ganja La. The snow was quite unbroken by any human feet, but covered with tracks of mousehares, gooral or thar and the curious splayed footprints of musk deer. Tracks of monal were everywhere and we kept running into little parties of these magnificent birds, usually a cock and 2 or 3 hens. They were astonishingly tame. The top of the ridge is just over 12,000 ft. (it runs gently down and widens out at Tharepati). In the bright sunshine the white world

was infinitely beautiful, the great white-splashed cliffs of the Gosainkund Lekh so thrillingly near to us now. But alas for the sacred lakes, the path was deep in snow and obviously impossible. I should imagine late May or June would be the time to do it before the leeches appear to spoil the pleasure. Returned to our camp, melted snow for drinking, and so to bed.

We woke next day to a grey sky. Choughs were calling and I watched a pair of Black-faced Laughing-thrushes creeping through the juniper scrub. Jungle Crows were all round the camp which evidently intrigued them as at least a dozen were collected full of curiosity. Every now and then they would all fly up suddenly and wheel backwards and forwards across the ridge, using the air currents and obviously enjoying their skill and complete mastery of the air. They have a deep bell-like note almost like a raven. While we had breakfast it began to snow, tiny white flakes blotting out the landscape. We had hoped to spend two days here, but no birdwatching could be done in this weather and as there was no hope at all of reaching the lakes we decided to move down to one of the more open margs. As I was packing, my husband shouted 'Hurry up here are flocks of your parrotbills', I rushed out and the junipers were full of birds—alas not parrotbills, but White-winged Grosbeaks. We found them very common up to 12,000 ft. in the junipers. They have a very distinctive double whistle, rather harsh but pleasing. During the morning we moved down to an open marg where there were four huts for shelter if needed, as our tent was certainly not snowproof. This was really our loveliest camp at a height of 11,000 ft. and we remained here three nights. The surrounding rhododendron and juniper forest swarmed with birds. Fulvettas were very common, also crested tits of three kinds, Yuhinas of three kinds, Variegated Laughing-thrushes and Nepal Wrens. Some migrants had already arrived. Blue-fronted Redstarts were common, already paired. I saw a female carrying nesting material into the crevices between logs forming the wall of a Sherpa hut. Although already nestbuilding at this height, these birds were still common in the Nepal Valley on our return, and remained so until first week of April. Red-flanked Bush-robins were also common here and these had certainly vanished from the Valley some time before. I saw an Orange-gorgetted Flycatcher uttering a curious note, never heard in the Valley so presumably a breeding call. Buntings were common, but I failed to identify them. They had a little rattling song which reminded me of the song of *E. stewarti*. The Chestnut-naped Yuhina also had a delightful little song, uttered in the evenings from the top of a bush. The turf here was as springy and kind to the feet as the turf of a Scottish moor. Apart from the primulas there were no flowers yet, but the promise of them everywhere in tiny rosettes of leaves. Amongst others, plants like tiny houseleeks not half an inch across.

The silver firs have been terribly thinned by cutting and burning, and what is so sad to see is the terrible waste of timber. Magnificent trees were lying with the wood rotting, only about a quarter of the tree having been used. However, the silver firs seem to be regenerating naturally, for although almost no full grown trees were seen, there were whole forests of young trees growing well and looking very healthy.

It is a much less happy case with the oaks at between 8,000 and 10,000 ft. for they will surely be destroyed altogether if nothing is done to control their lopping for fodder. I have only been used to the Alpine forests of the Western Himalayas and find the dense thickets of bamboo (now leafless), the moss and lichen festooning all the trees a curious background for fir and juniper and falling snow. We noticed that there is never any moss or lichen on the pink stems of *R. barbatum*. Is this because of the continuously peeling bark? The weather got steadily worse and on the last night we had to abandon our tent and take refuge in a Sherpa hut. The coolies tell us that the Sherpas bring their animals up here in June and stay till October. We had meant to spend the last day collecting birds, especially buntings, but the weather was too bad. It was with great reluctance that we left this wonderful Alpine world. We did the return journey in two days spending one night at the site of our second camp. We saw large swarms of migrating phylloscopi where there had been none except *P. pulcher* on the upward march. Many *P. affinis*, the only ones I could recognise for certain. On the ridge above Pati Bhanjyang we saw large flocks of Common Rosefinches and Himalayan Greenfinches, neither of which we had seen on the upward trip. I was much struck by the cheerfulness of the coolies who were always merry and full of jokes, even when conditions were very cold, which with their thin clothes and lack of shoes must have been most unpleasant for them. It was with the greatest regret that we returned to the Valley on March 27, and the dullness of everyday life. We are most grateful to H. H. the Maharajah for making our trip possible. Since writing the above, Mlle Ella Maillart has done the above journey, and reached the sacred lakes on May 8. She said the snow was still very deep north of the pass, although quite clear on the south side. She thinks it unlikely that the journey could be done before the end of April. She said that a mauve rhododendron (*R. campanulatum?*) was in flower at 11,500 ft. and above, but that otherwise there were still very few flowers.

LIST OF BIRDS SEEN ON THE GANDAK-KOSI WATERSHED

Corvus macrorhynchos : Jungle Crow.

Common on ridge at 11,000-12,000 ft.

Urocissa flavirostris : Yellow-billed Blue Magpie.

Seen below thick oak forest at 9,000 ft.

Nutcrackers and choughs were heard above 10,000 ft. but not seen.

Lophophanes melanolophus ? : Crested Black Tit.

Very common indeed in the juniper and rhododendron forest 10,000-12,000 ft. I had a very good close view and there was no rufous on the breast or abdomen. I see that Stuart Baker says it is not found east of Garhwal and would be interested to know if this is so. It has a thin 'zee zee' note, also a double note 'chee wee' very bell-like and ringing. I saw one pair carrying nesting material.

Lophophanes rubidiventris : Rufous-bellied Crested Tit.

Also very common in the same area as last species. Note a cheerful 'chee-er chee-er chee-er', also single call note. Like Mr. Smythies I noticed a grey patch between the rufous on the breast.

Lophophanes dichrous : Brown Crested Tit.

Seen in the same area as the above, but much the scarcest of the three. Very like a yuhina in appearance. I did not hear it utter any note.

Aegithaliscus ioschistos : Rufous-fronted Tit.

Common in small parties from 9,000 ft. up to 12,000 ft.

Sitta himalayensis : White-tailed Nuthatch.

Common along ridge up to 9,500 ft.

Garrulax albogularis : White-throated Laughing-thrush.

A large party seen on the ridge near Chamrie Bhanjyang at 8,400 ft.

Trochalopteron affine : Black-faced Laughing-thrush.

A pair, very silent, creeping about in the juniper scrub near our camp at 11,500 ft.

Trochalopteron variegatum : Variegated Laughing-thrush.

The common laughing-thrush at 11,000 ft. They were always in small parties, uttering low conversational notes all the time.

Trochalopteron lineatum : Streaked Laughing-thrush.

Heard round Pati Bhanjyang and on the ridge at 8,000 ft.

Fulvetta vinipecta : Hodgson's Fulvetta.

Very common round the camp at 11,000 ft. and down to 9,500 ft., usually in large mixed flocks with tits and yuhinas. Has a high pitched chirping note and also a sweet gentle little song.

Ixops nipalensis : The Hoary Bar-wing.

Common in the rhododendron forest 8,000-9,000 ft., one bird seen at 11,000 ft. Some of its notes are very like those of the Streaked Laughing-thrush.

Yuhina gularis : Stripe-throated Yuhina.

Common in large flocks all the way from Sheopuri 8,000 ft. up to 11,000 ft., usually in mixed flocks never away from the forest. Has a very curious and characteristic call, a long drawn out 'kweeee' very far-carrying.

Yuhina occipitalis : Chestnut-naped Yuhina.

Very common round our camp at 11,000 ft. In the evening they would utter a gay little song while swinging on the top of a bush.